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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by UNIFEM Australia, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2011/1.

Statement*

1. Relating to the priority theme of the fifty-fifth session for the Commission on the Status of Women, the issues that UNIFEM Australia Incorporated believes are necessary to be discussed during the Commission on the Status of Women relate to:

- Education and vocational training options
- The gender pay gap and workplace discrimination
- Disadvantaged groups' unequal access to employment and education

Education and vocational training

2. While Australia continues to rank quite high in women's educational attainment and participation, the Australian Human Rights Commission has noted that educational choices remain highly segregated on the basis of gender during primary, secondary school and tertiary education. This is one cause for concern which has predominantly pushed women into "feminized industries". The persistence of unequal pay in these industries is as much a social problem as it is systemic. The Australian Government Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency has made strides in identifying positive steps towards greater equality in workplace relations. This includes adopting and promoting a gender-sensitive work and training framework for Australian industry using sex disaggregated data. However, this must also be expanded to examine compounding conditions such as disability and race that significantly alter the experience of gender discrimination and job inaccessibility in the workplace.

3. The concluding observations report of Australia's recent Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women identifies concerns regarding segregation of fields of study in higher education and vocational training which ultimately results in occupational sex segregation of the labour market. The Commonwealth Government has stated its intention to close the gap in skills among Australia's workforce by expanding the places in a more diverse vocational and educational training system through the "skilling Australia" policy. However, this policy actually concentrates on male participation rates in the industry with a lack of consideration to the difficulty in accessing childcare as a general impediment to workforce participation without acknowledging that it impacts overwhelmingly on women.

4. Access to affordable childcare and support services for maternity leave are key components that determine women's access to and participation in full employment. Not only are women often discriminated against because of their continued role as primary caregivers often resulting in careers characterized by less stability and temporary positions, but additionally they suffer from a lack of long-term economic security through financial independence. Such is true of Australian women who cannot access superannuation payments unless employers are willing to continue contributing while on maternity leave. This leaves the potential for workplace discrimination much higher.

* Issued without formal editing.

5. The organization makes the following Government recommendations:

(a) Data related to school retention, completion and achievements must be disaggregated and cross-tabulated on the basis of gender, ethnicity and location;

(b) The State must allocate resources for women to pursue programmes of study and professional development in vocational training that are traditionally dominated by men. Particular attention must be paid to addressing preconceived notions about the capabilities of women within such trades;

(c) The newly introduced paid parental leave scheme, to begin 1 January 2011, must be re-examined after two years to account for the necessity of including a Government-funded superannuation scheme, a paternity leave component which reduces the household burden on women and to be more flexible enabling a household response to the division of caring responsibilities.

Gender pay gap and discrimination in the workplace

6. Noted most recently in the concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women for Australia, the gender pay gap in Australia is not only continuing, but worsening. Sexual harassment continues to be a serious problem in the workplace which not only deters women's entry into the workforce but significantly hinders a woman's advancement to an executive level position. The May 2010 report of the national centre for social and economic modelling reveals that the major contributing factor to this ongoing pay gap in Australia is simply being female.

7. In May 2010, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency reported that the gender pay gap had improved to 17.3 per cent, but that the average weekly ordinary time earnings of females working full-time were \$1,105.70 per week or 231.40 Australian dollars (AUD) per week less than their male counterparts, who earned an average of AUD 1,337.10 per week in May 2010. While the data show a decrease of 0.7 per cent over the quarter of 2010 (from 18.0 per cent), the gender pay gap in Australia has persisted at between 16 and 18 per cent for over a decade.

8. Implementing the recommendations from the 2009 inquiry into pay equity conducted by the house standing committee on employment and workplace relations is a widely acknowledged necessity within the Australian women's sector. This includes the introduction of a distinct Government unit within "Fair Work Australia" to monitor and combat sex discrimination in the workplace. Furthermore, a repeatedly missing component within current Australian anti-discrimination legislation concerns intersecting discrimination and specific forms of disadvantage that arise from the combination of gender with other discriminated positions including race, disability and sexuality. In its current status, Australia's fair work act of 2009 does not adhere to a comprehensive approach that addresses discriminatory workplace practices and schemes, and cultural barriers embedded in industrial and wider social structures. The consistency of cultural and social barriers embedded in Australia's workplace present a necessity for reform within the fair work act of 2009 in order to ensure access to decent employment conditions for women.

9. The organization makes the following Government recommendations:

(a) The provisions put forward in the "Make it fair" report are immediately adopted, including proposed amendments to the fair work act of 2009 that afford greater powers for the sex discrimination commissioner to act on wage discrimination;

(b) The establishment of a pay equity unit within "Fair Work Australia" with a broad mandate for change against sex discrimination in addition to developing and monitoring pay gaps mechanisms.

Disadvantaged groups' unequal access to employment and education

10. Distinct groups of women have been identified as facing a significant number of social and infrastructure barriers to initial training, education and ongoing access to and equality in employment in Australia, including women with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and migrant women. Of greater note are the frequent circumstances where women from such backgrounds often face two or more disadvantages and forms of discrimination, therefore placing them in double or triple jeopardy.

11. The concluding observations of Australia's recent Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women noted that women with disabilities are almost entirely absent from key leadership, education and employment opportunities. This represents a global trend identified whereby stigmas and exclusion resulting from limited knowledge and understanding of disabilities intersect with gender-based discriminations to place these women even at more risk of exclusion. This is undoubtedly similar to the situation of migrant women, however is exacerbated by their experience in unsafe working conditions as domestic labourers and factory workers who lack English skills and therefore puts them in a situation of greater vulnerability where they are unable to negotiate safe working conditions.

12. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have continued to lack access to adequate education in regional areas. This presents a diverse picture of the barriers facing training and education for women in Australia. Government programmes aimed at encouraging women's economic participation and full employment must therefore account for this diversity. Clearly, sociocultural factors, that may disadvantage girls from entering and pursuing a career in the sciences or technology both implicit and explicit, must be taken into account when formulating policies, including how gender may combine with other factors of inequality and which may leave girls doubly disadvantaged.

13. The organization recommends that Commonwealth, state and territory Governments implement programmes that develop skills and enhance employment opportunities for women while identifying specific barriers to diverse women's participation.